An Appreciative Study of a Play of Mode

Donald Barnes

THE LONDON stage of 1667 was graced with the first presentation of "The Tempest: or, The Enchanted Island," a greatly altered version of the comedy by William Shakespeare. The play was designed to conform with the taste of the Restoration period, and certain characteristics of Restoration comedy are clearly evident in it.

Sir William Davenant, the Cecil B. DeMille of the period, was chiefly responsible for the alterations. This play was the last work of this great Restoration figure, and it was undertaken by him chiefly with a view to scenical decoration. Indeed, Sir William gave free reign to his fancy and splashed joyously through Shakespeare's comedy.

John Dryden worked in collaboration with Davenant, but his part of the enterprise lay in the adaptation of the finished product to the stage.

From the opening scene, we are aware of the Restoration delight in spectacle. The setting for the first act confronts us as something both awe-ful and awful. The stage directions from the 1670 publication will more quickly reveal the meaning of this statement.

> SCENE I.—The front of the stage is opened, and the band of twenty-four violins with the harpsicals and theorbos which accompany the voices, are placed between the pit and the stage .....
>
> This frontispiece is a noble arch, supported by large wreathed columns, of the Corinthian order; the wreathings of the columns are beautiful with roses wound round them, and several Cupids flying about them. On the cornice, just over the capitals, sits on either side a figure, with a trumpet in one hand, and a palm in the other, representing Fame. A little farther, on the same cornice, on each side of a compass-pediment, lie a lion and a unicorn, the supporters of the royal arms of England. In the middle of the arch are several angels, holding the king's arms, as if they were placing them in the midst of that compass-pediment. Behind this is the scene, which represents a thick cloudy sky, a very rocky coast,

> and a tempestuous sea in perpetual agitation. This tempest (supposed to be raised by magic) has many dreadful objects in it, as several spirits in horrid shapes flying down amongst the sailors, then rising and crossing in the air. And when the ship is sinking, the whole house is darkened, and a shower of fire falls upon them. This is accompanied with lightning, and several claps of thunder, to the end of the storm."

Such color, and such splendor! The intensity and vitality of the tempestuous sea and the shower of flame is neatly balanced by the delicate presence of winding roses and the airy quality of blushing cupids. Only the mind of a Restoration playwright could conceive of such striking contrasts. But Davenant does not divorce sense from scene. In the first line of the play, he couples keen intellectual insight with the sensual beauty of the setting, as Mustacho sagely remarks:

> ". . . we shall have foul weather."

Bravo, Mustacho!

The reader would naturally presume that the intensity and vigor of such an opening scene would so completely tax the playwright's ingenuity for spectacle and his wit for dialogue that he could not possibly sustain the brilliance. But the reader would underestimate the dramatic powers of Sir William Davenant. For, as the play progresses, Davenant acquires such force that sheer momentum carries him far beyond the point where Shakespeare wearily penned his *"Exeunt Omnes."* Such a point, for Davenant, is merely a whistle-stop, a breather before dashing on to Act V, scenes two and three, and "Enter Everybody." In the final two scenes, our playwright, breathing hard, but still driving onward, puffs out the cheeks of the stage with an abundant harvest of human, super-human (and sub-normal) bodies, plus various and sundry odds and ends.

Of the human species participating in the final two scenes, we have Alonzo, Antonio, Gonzales, Miranda and Dorinda, Ferdinand and Hippolito, and the members of the ship's crew (slightly intoxicated, but all present). Among the super-human entities, we have Prospero, Ariel, Neptune, Amphrititie, Aeolus, Oceanus and Tethys. The ranks of the odds and ends are very adequately filled by "all ye sea-gods and goddesses, all ye Tritons and all ye Nereids," a fine assortment of sea-horses (thoroughbred, of course), the four winds, aerial spirits, ad infinitum. These many creatures indulge themselves in the most riotous goings-on, in which we have singing and general bustling about, and finally, twelve Tritons dancing a saraband. The elaborate and ornate splendor of the figures and their actions are matched by the setting, in which we see the Rising Sun, with a "number of aerial Spirits in the Air: Ariel flying from the sun, advances towards the Pit." Many critics have damned these scenes,

for they appear to have no sense, neither advancing nor retarding the plot, but merely seem to stand apart—little plays within a play. Such foolish criticism, of course, is not accepted by the majority of critics. Sir Dropsy Drypen, the theatre critic of the Restoration period, denounces such denouncers in a witty statement, to the effect that, "What a devil is the plot good for but to bring in fine things." Having once advanced to the Pit, Ariel sings a lovely ditty, which Shakespeare most inappropriately placed in his Act V, scene 1, but which is much more effective in Davenant's version. When one considers that heroic verse requires a full stage, one sees how very successful Sir William is, for his stage is literally packed to the rafters (including, of course, the airy spirits *in* the air).

A revision of any work of art is so much more acceptable if the author goes beyond the original in context, inserting information and themes derived from his own experience. Davenant excels in this field of endeavor. He has greatly enriched Shakespeare's play by the insertion of sea jargon, which he had acquired during his more adventurous years. In the first act, the action takes place aboard ship, and what could be more fitting than language which conforms to the atmosphere of the scene. Thus it is that we hear the sailors bellowing forth such salty terms as "Bring the cable to the capstorm," "Reef both top sails," "Man your main capstorm," "Our viol-block has given way," and "cut down the hammocks." The violence of the moment is greatly accentuated by this nautical terminology. Note the grisly swashbuckling quality of "Man your main capstorm," the pathos of "Our viol-block has given way," and the tone of complete despondency in "Cut down the hammocks." The spirit of the sea is captured by the raving sailors, and as Trincalo, the boatswain, remarks, "They are louder than the weather." The total effect of such passages prodded one critic to remark, "Such passages are very brief, but very terrible." We most heartily agree with him.

Davenant definitely establishes himself as a witty and clever playwright by his manipulation of Shakespeare's characters. Sir William was undoubtedly aware of the old maxim, "One evil is evil, but two are absolutely revolting." The contrasting character of the sister monster of Caliban, Sycorax, proves this statement, for they are indeed the most revolting part of the play. Critics differ on this point, however. Sir Walter Scott, in his preface to the 1883 edition of Dryden's works, states that "Much cannot be said for Davenant's ingenuity in inventing a sister monster for Caliban." Dryden, on the other hand, condones this technique and praises Davenant's "quick and piercing imagination." We will speak at several points of Sir William's "piercing imagination."

Davenant's rampaging imagination pierced even deeper into the Shakespearean comedy, for he also doubles the characters of Ferdinand and Miranda, the lovers, by presenting to us the figures of

Hippolito and Dorinda. The situation, then, is that we have not one man who has never seen woman, but two: not one woman who has never seen man, but two. It is not difficult to imagine the unlimited possibilities of such a situation, and Sir Will made the most of them. The lovers have ample opportunity for displaying their wit. The repartee is brilliant, and the battle of the sexes rages in not two, but four directions. Dorinda and Hippolito provide Davenant a splendid opportunity for inserting the favorite immoral innuendoes. Thus we have love flourishing and floundering in almost every manner conceivable. But Mr. Davenant's "piercing imagination" cannot rest with merely jabbing the Shakespearean drama. Davenant contrives a love tryst between Trincalo and Sycorax, thereby uniting two of nature's most grievous errors. This last instance of Davenant's "piercing imagination" leaves Shakespeare's creation looking like a sieve, pierced to the quick. But, in the event that some semblance of sanity may yet persist, Sir Will bestows upon Ariel, the spirit of the air, a lover spirit, Milcha.

It is interesting to note that Davenant's duplication of characters leads to some amusement. Whereas Caliban, in Shakespeare's version, attempted to violate the honor of Prospero's only daughter, he now has the enviable pleasure of violating the honor of two children.

When Hippolito, the virgin man, finally views woman for the first time, his response gives a basis for some good old-fashioned Restoration comedy. He learns that there are other such creatures in existence, and casually remarks, "I will have them all." Naturally, such a policy of universal amour gives Davenant a basis for rapid-fire, witty repartee on the part of all the lovers. This discourse extends for many pages, during which time love is discussed from every viewpoint (with the exception of romantic love, of course).

The play has been severely criticized for its departure from the plot sequence, and indeed, from the basic thought of the Shakespearean version. The fact is that Davenant's version is not concerned with plot, action, characterization, and other intrinsic folderol. For we have spectacle by the carload, and as one critic of the period remarked, "It is the greatest scene that ever England saw," referring to the last scene, already mentioned. We have lively scenes of wit, which give much pleasure, and, after all, who could prefer sense to wit? There are magniloquent scenes of ranting and raving, which are the backbone of good drama. As Sir Roger Fashion remarked after seeing the play, (and very wittily, we might add), "The rant's the thing." It must be pointed out that the worth of the play lies not in mere words and sense, but in "state, show and magnificence."

Davenant has taken the garment of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," altered its length, scissored it into separate sections, and then transversed it: that is, if it be prose, put it into verse, and if it be verse,

put it into prose. He then utilizes his "piercing imagination" by doubling each part, so that we have four sleeves, two collars, and no bottom. He then re-arranges the whole, so that the sense of the play is not so evident that we should tire of the play too soon. Indeed, if there be a lack of sense, there is a super-abundancy of everything else. He then snips here, snaps there, excluding those sections which have no wit, ergo, are useless to the play, such as the buttons of a greatcoat. For these extraneous sections, Davenant substitutes a prize of wit: so that we have characters line up, and then one speaks, then presently the other is upon him, slap, with a repartee, and then the first again, and so on. And thus, instead of dull sense and essential foolishness we have snip snap, hit for hit and dash. Most excellent!

We now have the very same garment of Shakespearean thought, only in a different form. Tattered, perhaps, but only by the quickness of Sir Will's "piercing imagination": baggy in parts, by all means, but with a certain glitter and brilliance and magnificence in parts, (as in the seat of a well-worn pair of blue serge trousers). If the vari-colored patch-work resulting from the alteration proves distasteful to you, remember that the play was a smashing success according to the criterion of that immortal Restoration critic and playwright, Mr. Bayes. That is, "Pit, box and gallery."

Three Poems

Frances King

Release

The time, though immeasurably late,
Has come when once again the mind
Finds space for all the old and worshipful
Scenes of other years. The sun and wind
Once more can find their place in more than words;
Again they offer sense of warmth and swift as silver
Movement through the trees. The leaves
Are trembling, laughing surfaces of green
Which feel as cool and living as the years before.
Clouds become more than background,
Filled with promise and sculptured with delight
In all their reckless, mounting lines of freedom.
And at the zenith comes the ever-rising thought,
Comes the singing, greening joy at heart-peak's height
That once more the Old Enemy of all
Is driven, beaten, fallen, slain again.